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Photos by Donald P. Harvey / Special to the Chronicle

City planners see an influx of theaters and arts groups as key to the turnaround of the Mid-Market area.

Arts hub envisioned

Theaters, artist groups seek space in blighted neighborhood

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Lies to recent City Hall political debates, and you'd think the beleaguered Mid-Market neighborhood was on the verge of becoming the next Silicon Valley with Twitter as its core.

While technology companies are moving in — and should get a big tax break if one is approved Tuesday by the Board of Supervisors — arts and theater remain the focus of the downtown neighborhood's promoters.



Owner Eddy Paez sweeps in front of his Hidden Treasures store on Market Street.

The series

The cast of an occasional series looking at the challenges of redeveloping one of San Francisco's most blighted stretches of street, Mid-Market.

Arts-related groups are increasingly scouting Mid-Market for space. The Museum of Craft and Design — which moved out of Union Square last year after a dispute with its landlord — is in negotiations to

Mid-Market continues on Arts

Arts groups eye blighted area

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secure a building on Market. The new Pop Art Museum is also eyeing a 50,000-square-foot space on the street after a deal to move into the Metreon fell through.

And Bill Schwartz, founder of the San Francisco Theater Festival, believes the curtain may finally rise on his decade-long quest to build a theater complex on Market Street to showcase small, alternative companies.

He is working with Theater Bay Area — an advocacy group that counts close to 400 theater and dance companies as its members — to potentially buy a building, probably one that now houses a strip club, and convert it into three or four small theaters with a restaurant and bar. Theater Bay Area conducted a survey and found that more than 100 of its members have serious interest in moving into Mid-Market. With architectural plans and some funding in hand, Schwartz said he is seeking philanthropic money to make it a reality.

"We're at a very special moment in time," said Schwartz, who founded the Coalition for Mid-Market Theater District to push his plan. "The market place can support this right now better than it has in many years."

The American Conservatory Theater has previously announced intentions to build its own arts complex at Turk and Market streets. The Black Box Arts Foundation, of Bowling

Man farm, and the Bay Area Video Coalition also have said they're eyeing the strip.

Add to this mix the handful of galleries and other arts-related groups that have already moved in, and the street's existing major facilities like the Drayton, Golden Gate and Warfield theaters, and Mid-Market as a thriving arts and theater hub could finally become a reality.

"Activating vacant storefronts around central Market and the Tenderloin is key to the overall improvement of these important neighborhoods," said Mayor Ed Lee.

"I am optimistic that if we continue to think creatively and in the long term, we can build on the theaters and galleries already in the area and look to this as a key to cultivating a positive, unique identity for the neighborhood."

The Great White Way

Market Street was once a destination, featuring neon-lit, show-biz theaters with lights as bright, the street was dubbed the Great White Way. But the glow faded into obscurity in the 1960s, when the street was torn up for construction of the Bay Area Rapid Transit system. Now, it's best known for homeless people, drug deals and the streets of urine.

Schwartz has fought since 2007 for the return of Market Street and rallied politicians and his colleagues, who said a theater complex for edge fare was a good idea. They pushed to New York City's Times Square and SoHo as once-



Photo by Donald P. Harvey / Special to the Chronicle

Mid-Market was once a bustling theater district, and the city hopes it becomes one again.

blighted neighborhoods that were improved largely thanks to the arts.

But sky-high real estate prices worked against Schwartz, and when the Board of Supervisors killed a redevelopment project planned for the area in 2005, his dream appeared to die.

But now Mid-Market is back at the forefront at City Hall. The Board of Supervisors on Tuesday is scheduled to vote on a six-year pay roll tax exemption on new employees for Twitter and other companies that the move into Mid-Market, which Schwartz said will provide a natural audience of young people with disposable income.

"It's a large audience that's untapped," he said. "Theater is an under-tapped resource in the city, and we could do better."

JoAnn Edwards, executive director of the Museum of Craft and Design, shares a similar vision for Mid-Market. Housed on Sutter Street since its cre-

ation seven years ago, the museum moved out last year after its landlord's construction project caused damage. It has held temporary "pop-up" exhibitions around the city since then, but is eyeing a permanent space on Mid-Market, though Edwards wouldn't say which building. She said she has spent a lot of time along the street and has talked to police officers whose beat includes Mid-Market.

The new 'hot spot'

"The notion of developing the Mid-Market area as an arts center has been discussed for a while," she said. "If we can be a catalyst, that's very exciting to us."

The museum doesn't have a permanent collection, but it should showcase temporary exhibitions ranging from wine labels to furniture to textiles. She said the museum will soon showcase former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's

collection of brooches dubbed "Read My Pins."

John Ananias, managing director of the new Pop Art Museum, is similarly excited about Mid-Market. A deal to move into the second floor of the Metreon fell through in 2006, and the museum is now negotiating for a large retail space on Market.

Eventually, he envisions it housing temporary exhibitions of well-known modern artists as well as emerging artists and an educational program for children, artists' residency programs and studio workshops.

"We really believe that we could be an anchor or centerpiece amongst the many other great organizations that are involved in the arts in the Mid-Market area," he said. "I think it's going to be a real big spot."

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